

2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

1 Kings 18:20-39

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.' All the people answered, 'Well spoken!' Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come closer to me'; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name'; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, 'Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood.' Then he said, 'Do it a second time'; and they did it a second time. Again he said, 'Do it a third time'; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.' Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.'

Ahab was a king of Israel that was up to no good. Truth be told, he was just a puppet. The person who was *really* in control was his wife, Jezebel. Jezebel, you see, was a worshiper of the pagan God, Baal. As soon as Ahab and Jezebel were married, Ahab decided that he, and all the rest of Israel for that matter, no longer needed to worship the Lord. And God, needless to say, was less than pleased about this. According to 1 Kings 16:33, "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him."

You see, the first of the 10 commandments is quite clear: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Simply put, when the Israelites remember that the Lord is God and worship God accordingly, things go pretty well. However, when they forget who is in charge and choose to place their trust and allegiance in other deities, things go poorly.

It should then be no surprise that Ahab and Jezebel’s bad influence over Israel did not go without consequences. There was a long drought in the land of Israel. For three long years, no single drop of rain touched the parched land of the Israelites. For any community, that would be a death sentence, but especially for the agricultural community of the Israelites.

For the prophet Elijah, the meaning of the drought was clear. Israel, under the crooked leadership of Ahab and Jezebel, had forsaken God and forgotten who was in charge. They had placed their trust in another god and had gone astray. For years, Elijah had spoken the truth, warning Ahab and Jezebel that they were heading for trouble. Ahab, as is typical of some politicians you may be hearing about in the news these days, ignored the criticism and, rather, hurled insults back instead of having a constructive dialogue. “You are a troubler of Israel!” Ahab said to the prophet Elijah.

To this insult, Elijah replied, “I have not troubled Israel; but YOU have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed Baal. Since you have forgotten who’s in charge, let’s have us a little friendly contest to remind everyone who is *really* God!”

And so, in the midst of the terrible drought, they had what I call a holy BBQ throwdown. On the one side was Elijah, alone except for the backing of, you know, God! On the other side were 450 worshipers of Baal. Before the contest began, Elijah gave the people one last chance to seek reason, to straighten up and fly right. “Listen,” he said, “how long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

Basically, Elijah was calling the people out on them “hedging their bets” and playing to the favor of both gods. In the people’s minds, they would flip flop back and forth between whichever god it was convenient for them to worship at the moment. They were lukewarm. They had no commitment. They had no trust.

Therefore, Elijah proposed that they place between them a large pile of wood. Each side would take a bull and, having cut the bull into pieces, place it on the wood. Then, whosever god sent down fire upon the wood to start the BBQ would clearly be the winner.

Ever the polite prophet, Elijah offered to let the Baal worshipers go first. Elijah sat down and made himself comfortable; he knew this might take a while.

And Elijah was right. For several hours, from morning until noon, the 450 people cried out to Baal, imploring their beloved pagan deity to rain down fire from the heavens. They then began to “limp” around the altar, doing a crazy jilted dance to, hopefully, gain the attention of Baal.

After several hours, Elijah began to mock the people. “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” Now, it is important for you all to know that in Hebrew, the phrase “has wandered away” is a euphemism for “using the bathroom.” That’s right. Elijah is sarcastically suggesting that the reason for Baal’s absence is that he is taking a leak in the little boys’ room.

Becoming ever more desperate at the hand of Elijah's taunts, the Baal worshipers begin to mutilate themselves, spilling their own blood in a last-ditch effort to get Baal to react to their pleas.

But nothing. Absolutely nothing. Exhausted, humiliated, breathless and bloody, the Baal worshipers admit defeat and watch to see what Elijah can do.

Apparently worried that the spectators cannot see well enough, Elijah beckons them to come closer. Elijah is so confident that YHWH will rain down fire that he pours water over the wood, soaking it not once, not twice, but three times. He places the meat on the soaked wood and steps back a bit.

Looking up to the heavens, Elijah prays to God, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

As soon as Elijah's last word escapes his lips, YHWH sends down fire from heaven and it engulfs the wood, even licking up the water that had been poured by Elijah. As the aroma of the cooking meat filled the air, the 450 Baal worshipers fell on their faces and admitted that the Lord was, indeed, God and not Baal.

And thus, Elijah and YHWH became the victors of this holy BBQ throwdown.

You see, you and I are not so different from the Israelites. We often want to hedge our bets and place our trust in multiple deities. The only thing is that our other deities are seldom as overt as a pagan god like Baal; they tend to be much more subtle than that. More subtle, maybe, but equally dangerous, if not more so.

We have droughts of many kinds. When the economy is down, we tend to put our trust in whichever politician says they will secure us more money. When terrorism is on the rise, we tend to put our trust in more guns. When irrational fear is fueled, we put our trust in laws that keep transgendered persons from using the bathroom that coincides with their sexual identity. When racism rears its ugly head, we place our trust in politicians that suggest the answer is to ban all muslims from entering this country.

Today's story from the book of First Kings is, at the same time, a humorous and sober reminder of our tendency to misplace our trust.

Elijah was a prophet. And a prophet's job is to remind the people of God that their trust should be in that same God.

Why is it that we are so quick to misplace our trust? It's not a new story, unfortunately. Since the garden of Eden, we have been tempted to listen to slithery voices that compete for our allegiance. It is a testament to God's faithfulness that God loves us enough to time and time again invite us back into a relationship of trust. A relationship of trust is not something that happens casually or coincidentally, which is why we, as a Christian community, gather on a regular basis to practice it.

I suppose the reason you and I are called to regularly practice our devotion to, and dependence upon, God is that it is all too easy to forget its importance. If we are not careful, we can backslide like the Israelites did at the hands of Ahab and Jezebel and forget, on the one hand, who God is and, on the other

hand, who we truly are. Sometimes, all it takes is a couple days without rain, a few hours of pain, and a week or two of bad luck, to entice us to search elsewhere for fulfillment.

Today's passage is a prophetic call for you and me to honestly reflect upon the "Baals" in our lives, the places in which we either knowingly or unknowingly place our trust other than God. That's why we need prophets like Elijah. You see, often when we think about prophets, we think about people that tell us about what God is going to do in the future. However, that is perhaps a gross oversimplification. Often, prophets tell us what God is going to do by reminding us of what God has *already done*.

Perhaps the best way to place our trust in God in the future is by continuing to share the stories of how God has provided in the past. That's one of the most important reasons that we gather as a community week in and week out. We gather to share the stories of God and to be reminded of who God is and who we are being called to be.

Today's story is a humorous story about a contest between deities - God in the one corner and whatever "gods" we choose to place at the other. And if there's one thing we learn in the biblical narrative, it is that this is never a fair fight. God triumphs again and again and we are called to be on the winning side. So, remember this story about this Holy BBQ Throwdown. Remember how stupid the people looked calling out to their pagan god to no avail. Remember how Elijah taunted them by telling them that their failure was probably just the result of their god using the portapotty. Remember how foolish they looked. Let us never look as foolish as them. Let us, together, practice faithfulness, complete faithfulness, in our providing God because God has tirelessly practiced never-ending faithfulness upon us.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.